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Anti-heroes of the Canadian Expeditionary Force

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Abstract

The civilian-soldiers that formed the ranks of the Canadian Corps created a unique soldiers' culture composed of songs, poetry, doggerel, cartoons, and newspapers during the course of the war to cope with the strain of service. This unique soldiers' culture offers keen insight into soldiers' experience. The anti-hero was one of the most important themes running through soldiers' culture. In a war where soldiers were elevated to heroes by civilians, the soldiers in turn often chose instead to emphasize the antiheroic in their cultural products. There were several antihero archetypes in Canadian soldiers' culture, and this essay will examine three: British cartoonist Bruce Bairnsfather's Old Bill, "old soldiers," and malingers. While these archetypes were separate, with identifiable qualities, they also bled into one another, creating a rich tapestry of anti-heroic cultural products and icons. These antiheroes provided a voice to the soldiers, even at times a language by which the soldiers could make sense of their war experience. The antiheroes were not always emulated, but their unheroic actions resonated with the trench warriors.

Résumé

Tout au long de la guerre, pour alléger la rigueur du service, les soldats civils qui composaient le Corps expéditionnaire canadien ont façonné une culture soldatesque unique faite de chansons, de poésie, de vers de mirliton, de bandes dessinées et de journaux. L'étude de cette culture ouvre une fenêtre inédite sur l'expérience de la vie de soldat. L'antihéros est l'un des thèmes les plus importants véhiculés par cette culture. Si en période de guerre les soldats étaient élevés au rang de héros par les civils, les soldats eux-mêmes préféraient l'anti-héroïque dans leurs produits culturels. La présente étude porte sur trois des nombreux archétypes d'antihéros qui existaient dans la culture soldatesque canadienne : Old Bill, le personnage créé par le caricaturiste Bruce Bairnsfather; les « vieux soldats »; et les fainéants qui se faisaient passer pour malades. Bien que séparés, ces archétypes aux qualités propres, pouvaient aussi être mélangés, pour donner lieu à une riche mosaïque de produits culturels et d'idoles anti-héroïques. Ces antihéros prêtaient leur voix aux soldats, offrant même par moment un langage grâce auquel les soldats arrivaient à assimiler leur

expérience de la guerre. Ces personnages ne servaient pas nécessairement d'inspiration, mais leurs actions non héroïques trouvaient un écho chez les combattants des tranchées.

“Heroes of St. Julien and Festubert,” proclaimed a Canadian recruiting poster from 1916, evoking the famous and costly Canadian battles of the preceding year. “Here’s to the Soldier who bled ... Their fame is alive, though their spirits have fled.”¹ It was not just posters that effusively praised the hero-soldiers, but public discourse from politicians, the pulpit, and newspapers routinely referred to the heroic sacrifice of the soldiers overseas and the need to support them and their families.²

Some 620,000 Canadians enlisted from 1914 to 1918 to serve King and country in what many from this generation called the Great War for Civilization. The Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) drew recruits from across the country, from almost all regions, religions, and trades. This army was composed primarily of civilian-soldiers — for the most part farmers, clerks, students, and bankers, rather than professional soldiers. From the First Contingent soldiers, who left Canadian shores in October 1914, to the old breed of the Canadian Division, who survived their trial-by-fire engagement against overwhelming German forces, shells, and poison gas at the Second Battle of Ypres in April 1915, the war quickly forged heroes for the young Dominion.³ Canadian airmen, especially fighter pilot aces such as Billy Bishop, William Barker, and Raymond Collishaw, were elevated to the status of “knights of the sky,” aerial warriors who fought by different rules as they flew into the wild blue yonder.⁴ Individual infantrymen were harder to distinguish among the masses in the muddy trenches of the Western Front, although gallantry medals offered tangible proof of bravery. By war’s end, 70 Canadians were recognized with the prestigious Victoria Cross, while thousands more were awarded lesser, if still significant, gallantry medals.⁵ While these medals were politicized, with some deserving soldiers going unrewarded while others reaped the benefits of friend-

1 Canadian War Museum (CWM), 19900055-001, poster.

2 For the patriotic discourse on the home front, see Jeffrey Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship during the Great War* (Calgary: University of Alberta Press, 1996), chap. 1.

3 On Second Ypres, see Tim Cook, *At the Sharp End: Canadians Fighting the Great War, 1914–1916*, vol. I (Toronto: Viking, 2007) and Andrew Iarocci, *1st Canadian Division at War, 1914–15: A Study of Training, Tactics and Leadership* (Ph.D. diss., Wilfrid Laurier University, 2005).

4 For the knights of the sky, see Jonathan Vance, *High Flight: Aviation and the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: Penguin, 2002).

5 On gallantry medals, see Surgeon Commander F.J. Blatherwick, *Canadian Orders, Decorations, and Medals* (Toronto: The Unitrade Press, 1994); for a critical look at the awarding of medals, see Hugh Halliday, *Valour Reconsidered: Inquiries into the Victoria Cross and other Awards for Extreme Bravery* (Toronto: Robin Brass Studio, 2006).

ships, patronage, or being at the right place at the right time, they were nonetheless scarce. Medals or not, almost all the Canadians who enlisted were viewed as heroes, soldiers who had sacrificed much for King and country.⁶

While Canadian soldiers were regarded as heroes, all men needed motivation to keep fighting in the difficult conditions in and behind the trenches. Medals were not the only form of reward, and, in fact, were far from the most important to the soldiers who relied on their comrades to see them through the conflict. Other simpler pleasures, such as mail, food, rest, rotation, and rum, and more complex factors, such as the creation of a fatalistic belief system and respect for leadership, allowed soldiers to keep fighting and to avoid succumbing to the stress of unending combat.⁷ Soldiers also developed their own unique culture to help them endure.

This culture was manifested in songs, writing, sketches, theatre, folk art, and other products fashioned by the soldiers for themselves and one another to make meaning of their war experiences. While the civilian-soldiers were often shaped by military training and conditioning, they did not forsake their pre-war lives and drew heavily upon civilian influences. Nonetheless, the culture was wrought by the environment and circumstances of the Western Front and service in the military, and reflected a new sub-culture.⁸ The production and sharing of these cultural products forged social relationships, helping soldiers engage in a shared sense of agency, craft their own sense of identity, and sustain morale. But this culture was often exclusive of outsiders. The *R.M.R. Growler*, trench newspaper of the 14th Battalion, a journal published for soldiers by soldiers, noted in its first issue of 1 January 1916:

...it is hardly to be expected that anyone outside our own immediate circle will find any interest in what, owing to circumstances, will be necessarily

6 For the postwar elevation of soldiers to heroes, see Jonathan Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997).

7 For Canadian combat motivation, see Tim Cook, *Shock Troops: Canadians Fighting the Great War, 1917–1918*, vol. II (Toronto: Viking, 2008), chaps. 12–15.

8 For Canadian studies of soldiers' culture, see Jonathan Vance, "Battle Verse: Poetry and Nationalism after Vimy Ridge," in *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment*, eds. Geoffrey Hayes, Andrew Iarocci, and Mike Bechthold (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007) and Andrew Horrall, "Charlie Chaplin and the Canadian Expeditionary Force," in *Canada and the Great War: Western Front Association Papers*, ed. Briton C. Busch (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), 27–45. For international studies on soldiers' culture, see J. G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies, 1914–1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); James P. Daughton, "Sketches of the Poilu's World: Trench Cartoons from the Great War," in *World War I and the Cultures of Modernity*, eds. Douglas Mackaman and Michael Mays (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000); John Brophy and Eric Partridge, *Soldiers' Song and Slang: 1914–1918* (London: E. Partridge, 1931); Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War 1914–1918: National Sentiment and Trench Journalism in France during the First World War*, trans. Helen McPhail (Providence, RI: Berg, 1992).

crude in conception and local in character ... our humour must be rather blunt to appeal to the men spending their days and nights in wet and muddy trenches, dodging shells, and cursing the weather, the Huns, the Quartermaster, the Transport Officer, and anything else that occurs to them Should any layman be unfortunate enough to secure a copy, we can only sympathize with him and apologise, as it was not intended that the 'Growler' should wander from the family circle.⁹

Much of the soldiers' culture was not easily shared with or understood by outsiders. And this, of course, was part of its appeal.

While ignored in much of the writing relating to the Great War, where historians have more readily turned to the highbrow culture of official war art, avant-garde dance, and the élite discourse of war poets, there is much to be learned from the culture that was created by and supported the majority of soldiers who never painted the battlefields in studios behind the lines, danced to Stravinsky, or picked up a pen to write searing poetry with the Cambridge and Oxford educated British officer class.¹⁰ Instead, the armies of civilian-soldiers more readily embraced popular and parodied songs, music-hall inspired theatre, soldier-published trench newspapers, as well as other cultural products, to see their way through the terrible and seemingly endless war. This culture came from the soldiers themselves, allowing them to make sense of the war effort. Soldiers' culture was infused not only with pre-war cultural references, but also new wartime narratives, language, and perspectives.

The anti-hero was one of the most important themes running through soldiers' culture. In a war where soldiers were elevated to heroes by civilians, the soldiers often chose to emphasize the anti-heroic in their cultural products. These anti-heroes, characters who lacked traditional heroic qualities such as courage or self-sacrifice, became the soldiers' heroes. This embracing of the anti-hero did not mean that the soldiers turned their back on their heroic comrades, as they surely respected soldiers exhibiting traditional "heroic" qualities; but there was space for the hero and the anti-hero to sit comfortably together within the soldiers' culture. Soldiers were reshaping their shared sense of identity by presenting images in stark contrast to those emanating from the home front.

There were several anti-hero archetypes in Canadian soldiers' culture, and this paper will examine three: British cartoonist Bruce Bairnsfather's Old Bill, "old soldiers," and malingers. While these archetypes were separate, with identifiable qualities, they also bled into one another, creating a rich tapestry of anti-heroic cultural products and icons. These anti-heroes provided a voice for

9 CWM, *R.M.R. Growler* 1 (1 January 1916), 1.

10 See Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Toronto: Lester, Orpen and Dennys, 1989) and Brian Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front: Britain's Role in Literature and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

the soldiers, and at times even a language by which the soldiers could make sense of their war experience. The anti-heroes were not always emulated, but their unheroic actions resonated with the trench warriors.

Bruce Bairnsfather and Canadian Cartoonists

British officer Bruce Bairnsfather was the most popular cartoonist of the war, admired by British, Canadian, and most Allied soldiers. It may seem odd in a discussion about Canadian trench culture to highlight a British cartoonist, but it is worth remembering that almost half of the Canadian Expeditionary Force was formed by soldiers who had been born in Britain, and, of course, Canadian culture, both high and low, was influenced heavily by British content. The Canadian forces fought with the British during the war and were strongly influenced by its traditions and ethos, and Canada's pre-war military heroes were often Imperial.¹¹

Bairnsfather, a cartoonist with *The Bystander*, a British paper with a large working class readership, had found a pre-war niche with his cartoons lampooning British life, but was by no means a national star. Bairnsfather was quick to enlist when Britain declared war and his service with the infantry at the front immersed him in the unique culture of the soldiers, which he captured in his drawings. His cartoons were published in a collection, *Fragments from France*, which eventually sold an astonishing 250,000 copies.¹² Several additional compilations were rushed to the public, and his cartoons and characters were franchised in postcards, posters, plays, movies, souvenirs, and other ephemera, with their appeal extending well into the postwar years.

Bairnsfather's inspiration was drawn from his men and service in the army. Their grouching and grumbling over the food and mud became fodder for his cartoons. But his cartoons went beyond the physical discomforts to address the stress and strain at the front: the fears of standing sentry, the agony of shelling, the dislocation from civilized society. While he was a lieutenant in the line (later he was elevated to a captain when he became the army's only official cartoonist), he always treated the rank and file with respect. Many of Bairnsfather's characters, and especially his beloved anti-heroes Old Bill and Alf, epitomized some of the soldiers' experiences while serving on the Western Front. The disheveled, overweight, pipe-smoking, bushy-mustached Old Bill and his companions were not cowards, but they certainly were not heroes in the traditional sense.

11 On Imperial heroes for Canadian youth, see Mark Moss, *Manliness and Militarism: Educating Young Boys in Ontario for War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) and in Britain, Michael Paris, *The Great War and Juvenile Literature in Britain* (Westport: Praeger, 2004).

12 Tonie and Valmai Holt, eds., *The Best of Fragments from France by Capt. Bruce Bairnsfather* (London: Phin Publishing, 1978), intro., part II.

Bairnsfather's Old Bill and the other characters in the cartoon chronicles were instantly recognized by any British or Canadian Tommy, who saw themselves in the grumpy warrior. He endured as they endured; he growled what they growled. The grim but humourous view of war resonated with the soldiers: this was no pandering, no condescension, no "eye-wash." It was the view of the war from the bottom. Bairnsfather's cartoons crossed national boundaries because his depictions were less about national stories and more about what united the common soldiers in service, servility, and survival. They represented the "poor bloody infantry's" ability to endure the horror of war with a wry smile, a phlegmatic phrase, and a shrug of the shoulders.

"These cartoons by Bairnsfather are very good and true to life," wrote Canadian infantryman Basil Morris to his sister.¹³ Bairnsfather's cartoons seemed to capture the war experience. His most famous cartoon, "A better 'Ole,'" revealed in grim humour that during a bombardment there was no where to run. Some of his works had a vein of sentimentality running through them, reminding soldiers of the life and loves they left behind. Others satirized the usual suspects: the enemy, parasitic profiteers at home, or the out-of-touch generals behind the lines. Another Canadian from the infantry, H.R.N. Clyne, remarked, "Our first long winter campaign against a welter of mud and caved-in trenches now began. The life was hard and dreary but often cheered by Bruce Bairnsfather's famous and cogent cartoons featuring 'Alf' and 'Old Bill,' that did so much to portray our kind of existence for those at home."¹⁴

Cartoons are cultural objects that must be read as more than simply an expression of the creator; assessing their value requires at some level an understanding of the cartoon's reception. These cartoons had multiple levels of meaning, suggesting different messages to civilians and soldiers. It is clear that the Bairnsfather cartoons resonated with the rank and file and junior officers, and perhaps also at higher levels, although there is little mention of Bairnsfather in the personal papers of commanders. Old Bill was viewed initially on the home front as unpatriotic, almost treasonous, until the soldiers themselves offered a chorus of approval.¹⁵ The civilian critics retreated, yet remained unsure why soldiers would embrace these unheroic images, when those at home were doing their best to elevate them to heroic status.

Forced to confront a terrible new world of destruction, soldiers often had trouble capturing their fear, exhaustion, and strain in letters, either because of formal military censorship or the simple inability to put words to paper. But Bairnsfather's cartoons seemed to offer a common language, one of understood

13 Grace Morris, *But this is our war* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 56.

14 H.R.N. Clyne, *Vancouver's 29th: A Chronicle of the 29th in Flanders Fields* (Vancouver: Tobin's Tigers Association, 1964), 7.

15 See Tonie and Valmai Holt, *In Search of the Better 'Ole: The Life the Works and the Collectables of Bruce Bairnsfather* (Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1985).

symbols, which allowed soldiers to speak to one another and sometimes even to loved ones at home. Lieutenant Maurice Pope could write to his parents in early 1916: "I am well physically, but very tired mentally. This work is quite a strain on one and these nights I am living Bairnsfather's cartoon — 'This — war will be the death of us yet'."¹⁶ Soldiers adopted the classic Bairnsfather phrases as a way to communicate with recognized cultural references. We cannot be sure if Pope's parents would have understood the allusion to Bairnsfather, but it was common enough and ingrained in Pope for him to turn to it to describe the nearly indescribable. Hugh Kay of the 43rd Battery noted that during an artillery bombardment, if one listened to the men taking shelter in their dugouts, "you might hear faint snatches of 'Where did that one go to 'Erbert'," the reference to a cheeky Bairnsfather cartoon.¹⁷ A Canadian sniper officer, Peter Anderson, wrote grimly of shooting a German in the face, who peered through a hole between the sandbags in the parapet: "if they knew of a 'better 'ole' they should have 'gone to it'."¹⁸ The anti-heroic slang and phrases of Old Bill became the voice of the soldiers who appropriated the words to fill their own silences.

Familiar heroes, such as actor Charlie Chaplin, music hall star Harry Lauder, and Old Bill, united Canadian, British, and other English-speaking Empire forces.¹⁹ Yet there were aspects unique to the Canadian forces too. Samuel Honey, a former teacher who rose through the ranks to become an officer and was awarded the Victoria Cross before his death in the last months of the war, wrote to his parents about how much he admired Bairnsfather's cartoons for capturing "incidents and situations . . . I wish I had a talent for drawing like Capt. Bairnsfather."²⁰ He did not, but other Canadians did. The popularity of Bairnsfather's cartoons sparked Canadian imitations, which were often published in soldiers' trench newspapers. Print was, according to Corporal John Ward, a "medium where he [the soldier] can make himself heard."²¹ With the Canadian forces drawing its recruits from across the country and all professions, there were many cartoonists in their ranks. Some were inspired by Bairnsfather and made no apologies for "sampling" his work. *Oh, Canada*, a commemorative publication, had several cartoons that played on Bairnsfather success, with titles such as "A Figment from Flanders, (with apologies to

16 Maurice Pope, *Letters from the Front, 1914–1919* (Toronto: Pope & Co., 1996), 36.

17 Hugh Kay, *Battery Action! The story of the 43rd (Howitzer) Battery, Canadian Field Artillery, 1916–1919* (Ottawa: CEF Books, 2002), 46.

18 Pete Anderson, *I: That's Me: Escape from German Prison Camp and other Adventures* (Edmonton, Alta: Bradburn Printers, 1920), 46.

19 For Chaplin and Lauder, see Horrall, "Charlie Chaplin and the Canadian Expeditionary Force."

20 CWM, Samuel Honey papers, 19950008-014, letter, 6 September 1916.

21 CWM, *The Forty-Niner* 4 (December 1915), 16.

Captain B —nsf——r.),” that depicted two scared Canadians working in the dark of No Man’s Land, either repairing or cutting through barbed wire: “Say, George, when we get back to our farm in Ontario[,] I’ll bet the old snake fence will be good enough for me!” “Same here! I don’t never want to see anymore of this blame stuff again (*And so say we, all of us!*).”²² Here, and in other cheeky, mimicking cartoons, the Canadians were building on the accepted anti-heroic message established by Bairnsfather and other cultural products. While not overtly anti-heroic, admitting fear and fatigue was far different than the hyper-patriotic speeches from the home front or the caricatured superheroes of war posters. While Canadian cartoonists depicted all manner of subjects, the anti-hero figured prominently, although at least one cartoonist in *The Brazier*, the trench newspaper for the 3rd Brigade, queried politely if Alf and Old Bill-like soldiers truly represented the Canadians? There was no answer to that question in forthcoming editions of the paper, although in the same issue there was a dopey-looking Canadian soldier, who could pass as Alf’s twin, dreaming of happy times and food away from the trenches.²³

The Listening Post, the most popular Canadian trench newspaper that reached a circulation of 20,000 in the summer of 1917, had one of the most talented cartoonists in the CEF.²⁴ Hugh Farmer was described by another slightly envious trench newspaper editor as being “good enough to put him in the Capt. Bairnsfather class.”²⁵ His drawings of Canadians often presented them as stronger, stockier, and better looking than Bairnsfather’s sad-sack figures; but Farmer also embraced the anti-heroic theme to appeal to his readers. One December 1917 cartoon depicts a soldier trying to get out of the line by applying for a transfer to the motor transport unit. The officer asks, “What do you know about motors?” The private replies, “Only that they don’t go into the trenches, sir.”²⁶ Gentle humour no doubt, with a simple punch-line, but also another acknowledgment of the anti-heroic as the haggard soldier looks to escape the front; and for good measure, the image is a slight insult directed against the transport soldiers in the service corps, and others along the safer lines of communication, positions that were usually derided by the infantry as “bomb-proof.”

The cartoons could be more daring. The *Iodine Chronicles* made light of “Activities on the Western front (Un-official),” which depicted a bar fight in an *estaminet*.²⁷ Alcohol-fueled battles were not uncommon behind the lines, between the Canadians and other national forces, or even amongst themselves;

22 *Oh, Canada* (London: Simpkin and Marshall, 1917), 16.

23 CWM, *The Brazier* 8 (10 February 1917), 1.

24 For sales, see CWM, *The Listening Post* 19 (October 1916), 118.

25 CWM, *The Iodine Chronicle* 14 (22 December 1917), 9.

26 CWM, *The Listening Post* 29 (1 December 1917), 17.

27 CWM, *The Iodine Chronicles* (22 December 1917).

December 1, 1917.

THE LISTENING POST.

Special Christmas Number.

THE ANCIENT ORDER OF LEAD SWINGERS.

Inaugural Meeting to be held far from No Man's Land.

ALL experts at swinging the lead are hereby notified that it is intended to form a new branch of the above association with special powers for dealing with refractory M.O.'s. All interested are requested to attend the meeting, which will be held two days prior to the next attack on the Western Front. The provisional committee, comprising the names of many eminent leaders of the cause, such as Lord Windhupp, Sir Verey Badhart, and the Duke of Wellinrear, have secured for this occasion a well-fortified dug-out in Absentee Square, facing Deserter Lane (map ref. 43-41, No. 9 Iodine). The M.F.P. will not be on duty, so prospective members need not carry their trenching tool handles. All windy soldiers are welcome.

cushiest Field Ambulances (newly organised) in the Corps area.

NOTE.—Further suggestions will be open to discussion.

An appeal, largely signed by prisoners of war and conscientious objectors, has been addressed to commanding officers, requesting them to facilitate the attendance at this meeting of all ranks, and we are assured that defaulters and those in clink will be excused from Dury on this occasion.

N.B.—Subscriptions, for the propagation of the praiseworthy objects of the above association, will be thankfully received by the Secretary of the above new branch.

PRE. EVERSTICK, C.B. (toujours).

Temporary Branch Office: Swingit Ave., Billetville.



OFFICER (to applicant for transfer to M.T.): "What do you know about motors?"
PRIVATE: "Only that they don't go into the trenches, sir."

Motors cartoon; credit: Canadian War Museum, Military History Research Centre,
The Listening Post 29, n.p.



The Writing on the Wall ; credit: Canadian War Museum, Military History Research Centre, The Forty-Niner, 23

but this cartoon reveals broken wine bottles used as weapons, knives, and pistols. With temperance groups at home already worried about soldiers' seemingly unfettered access to alcohol, either through wet canteens or the daily rum ration, this cartoon of beer-soaked brawlers would have been no laughing matter.²⁸ But it was to the soldiers, who well understood the pleasure of a blowout party behind the lines before returning to the front.

There has been some attention by historians directed at wartime cartoons, suggesting that pictorial humour was a form of social mobilization in French and British civilian societies.²⁹ If that is the case, then surely soldiers' cartoons, created by their own hands and for their own comrades, were at least as powerful in mobilizing the soldiers. But mobilizing them for what? Cartoons, like stories or art, are surrounded by layers of interpretation and understanding. Decoding a cartoon's meaning also requires an understanding of the context behind the image and punch-line, and sometimes it is lost over time. Is the pen mightier than the sword? Most soldiers would have passed on bringing a pen on a trench raid, but the pen could still draw blood, or at least help explain and make sense of the soldiers' experience.

Veteran and historian G.R. Stevens observed the popularity of Bairnsfather and his messages. "His gallery of characters — Old Bill, Alf, Bert, his fed-up privates and his sardonic sergeants — became celebrities in their own right and their cross-talk became a common coin of conversational exchanges wherever English was spoken. 'Where did that one go?' 'If you knows of a better 'ole go to it?' 'What time do you feed the sea lions, Alf?' 'There goes our blinkin' parapet again!' 'Who made that 'ole? Mice.' 'They've evidently seen me,' and a hundred other catchphrases portrayed a world war as Britons wanted to see it — stimulating, dangerous but on the whole a rather amusing business."³⁰ Stevens is right to note Bairnsfather's prevalence amongst and his influence on the soldiers, but perhaps he offers too literal a reading of the cartoons, especially when combined with "old soldiers" or other "outsiders" that were so readily embraced by the soldiers. These anti-heroic cultural figures were more than simply an "amusing business" — they were the means by which the armies of civilian-soldiers coped with the terrible strain of the war, pushed back against authority and hierarchy, and interpreted their wartime experiences.

28 Tim Cook, "Wet Canteens and Worrying Mothers: Soldiers and Temperance Groups in the Great War," *Histoire sociale / Social History* 35, no. 70 (June 2003): 311–30; Tim Cook, "'More as a medicine than a beverage': 'Demon Rum' and the Canadian Trench Soldier in the First World War," *Canadian Military History* 9, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 7–22.

29 See Pierre Purseigle, "Mirroring societies at war: pictorial humour in the British and French popular press during the First World War," *European Studies* xxxi (2001): 289–328.

30 G.R. Stevens, *A City Goes to War: History of the Loyal Edmonton Regiment* (Brampton, Ont.: Charters, 1964), 66.

Old Soldiers

Every unit had its “old soldiers:” experienced veterans from the Permanent Force or the South African War, often older in age and certainly more experienced in the ways of the world. But age alone did not define “old soldier” status: there were many “old soldiers” who had spent a year or two at the front, had become jaded, and all before their 20th birthday. Generally, this class of soldier had pre-war military experience. Victor Trowles recounted how one “old soldier” in his platoon could “quote the King’s regulations by the yard. And we used to sit down with our mouth open and listen to him We just listened to him as if he was a tin god. We’d pester the life out of the fellow.”³¹ “Old soldiers” carried with them knowledge in an army short of military experience — beyond that of the Militia — even if supposed Zulu spear wounds looked suspiciously like appendicitis operation scars. “Old soldiers” displayed a crusty and phlegmatic attitude that made them colourful figures among military units; these veterans understood the ways of the army, allowing them to take liberties whenever they could. A.G. Jacobs remembered two “old soldiers” running a scam: one of them wormed his way into the position of issuing uniforms, where he always provided new men with clothing that was too small or too big; the second man then offered to help the mismatched soldier for a few dollars and get him better fitting clothes, of which they had an abundant supply of official regulation. When Jacobs and his mates caught on to the operation, they were not angry with the soldiers; instead, they admired their resourcefulness.³² Charles Savage, a pre-war clerk from Waterloo, Québec, wrote: “The old soldiers in the regiment had long ago introduced us to Crown and Anchor and we were still innocent enough to hope for the best when we bet on the old Mud Hook.”³³ Most found that the house, run by the “old soldiers” with the boards to allow for betting in the dice game, almost always won. Yet still the soldiers played.

Why was there admiration and not anger for these “artful dodgers,” as some of the “old soldiers” were known, especially when the work they avoided ultimately fell to other soldiers in the unit?³⁴ While some of the “old soldiers” rose to become essential members of the fighting unit, passing on military knowledge and skills, others remained hopeless cases.³⁵ Yet there was something about these latter “old soldiers” that appealed to the civilian-soldiers of

31 CWM, CBC radio program “Flanders Fields,” 1964, transcripts, Episode 3, page 4.

32 Ibid., Episode 3, page 5.

33 Canadian Letters and Images Project, Charles Savage, memoir, unpaginated.

34 Andrew Robertshaw, “‘Irrepressible Chirpy Cockney Chappies’? Humour as an Aid to Survival,” *Journal of European Studies* xxxi (2001): 277–87.

35 For the important role of the experienced “old soldiers” in the First Contingent, see Desmond Morton, *When Your Number’s Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (Toronto: Random House, 1993), 74–5. \

the CEF, in a similar way to the anti-hero. Their shirking of duty was not always emulated, but it was often envied. Perhaps it was the hardening process of training and early combat that drove many new recruits to the realization that the army and military discipline were not about fairness or justice, and that an experienced soldier survived by his wits. While the Canadian soldier eventually took pride in their reputation as battle-hardened warriors, the foil to this aggressive behavior was the “old soldier,” who also became an important symbol among Canadians in supporting this constructed reputation.³⁶ Soldiers’ cultural products, from songs to jokes, and especially the trench newspapers, revealed the “old soldiers” appeal. While the “old soldiers” were not a large group among the fighting formations, they stood out in the soldiers’ stories and cultural products.

At the heart of the image of the “old soldier” was an anti-authoritarian message. Many of the “old soldier” jokes and cartoons revealed a tension between the soldiers and authority. In an army where everyone took orders, there was inherent frustration at the sometimes stupid and senseless demands from above. Grumbling and grouching was common in the army. “It is the soldier’s privilege to grouse,” wrote Armine Norris, an enlisted man who later received a commission. “These are the same kind of men who, with eyes wide open, entered hell to die for people and a country that had never done anything very special for them.”³⁷ Victor Wheeler of the 50th Battalion remarked: “We are being treated very badly here, and I am doing my ‘expected’ share of grouching. It doesn’t remedy conditions, but it does help a fellow to keep going, like a horse under the whip!”³⁸ Complaining and grumbling at their lot — from being ordered to dig latrines to carrying spools of barbed wire to the front line trenches, and all of the other laborious tasks asked of the soldiers who were known informally as the “pack mules” of the army — was annoying, but generally accepted by the soldiers and their officers. But they would not do so without a word or two of disgust. As part of this mild “push back,” the soldiers took delight in imagining how they could outwit their seniors, who had the hierarchy and discipline of the army on their side.³⁹ By enjoying the antics of the “old soldiers,” most of their comrades could live vicariously through them in a safe environment, which neither required emulation nor forced officers to react strongly, as would be the case for more mutinous actions.

36 Carman Miller, “The Crucible of War: Canadian and British Troops During the Boer War,” in *The Boer War: Army, Nation and Empire*, eds. Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey (Canberra: Army History Unit, 2000); Tim Cook, *Clio’s Warriors: Canadian Historians and the Writing of the World Wars* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006), chaps. 1 and 2.

37 Armine Norris, *Mainly for Mother* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1919), 118.

38 Victor Wheeler, *The 50th Battalion* (Ottawa: CEF Books, 2000), 132.

39 On military discipline and justice, see Morton, *When Your Number’s Up*; Chris Madsen, *Another Kind of Justice: Canadian Military Law from Confederation to Somalia* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1999).

A cartoon from *The Forty-Niner*, the newspaper for the 49th Battalion, summed up the tension of the “old soldier,” as expressed through the soldiers’ cultural products. He stands at attention before his commanding officer at a court-martial, where he is being punished for returning late from leave, and looks the worse for wear after two weeks or so of drinking in England. On being asked why he was late, the private replies respectfully: “Sir, I was hurrying to catch my train and I met the Salvation Army Band playing ‘God Save the King.’ I had to stand at attention as became a Forty-Niner, and it caused me to lose my train by about a minute.” The commanding officer, who knows he is hearing a story, nonetheless replies, “Dismissed,” thereby letting the “old soldier” off the hook.⁴⁰ The ranker is not dodging the illegality of being late from leave, but instead he has found a legitimate and patriotic response. Here, we see the “old soldier” talking his way out of a tight situation, and his commanding officer granting him that leeway without losing face.

The “old soldier” did not always “win,” but the end result was sometimes less important than the exchange between leaders and led. Sergeant W.B. Thomas of the 49th Battalion offered a soldiers’ poem, “Beaten to a Frazzle,” which reveals another side to the relationship between the officers and rank and file. In the poem, a major is fed up with men asking for leave from the front and then overstaying it, to which they could receive only minor punishments. He decides to make an example of an “old offender,” Private Mathews. Mathews has asked for six days to see his wife, whose health is bad; he implores: “She’s all I’ve got, and we’ve been wed / Just over twenty years; / We’ve shared our joys, our ups and downs / Our pint of supper beer.” The major is unmoved, but it is hard to counter the argument. He bluffs, saying he has a letter from Matthew’s wife, “Which says that when you are at home / She’s frightened for her life / She says that if you ask for leave, / To turn you down quite hard.” The soldier knows he is beaten and responds by saluting and turning away, but then stops and asks for a final word:

Can I have further speech, he said
As conditions would have been
If you were not an officer,
And we’d no rank?

All right, man to man, the major said,
I’ll hear what you’ve to say;
But don’t say aught about reform
I guess that’s past your day.

40 CWM, *The Forty Niner* 1, no. 1 [n.d.], 22. Also see the similar joke in *The Listening Post* 12 (15 March 1916), 66.

It's just this, sir, the man replied.
My reputation here
Is not what you would call first class:
They say I'm fond of beer.

They say I fight, and swear, and shirk
And perhaps it's all quite true,
But when it comes to lying, sir,
My hat comes off to you.

You said you'd had a letter, sir,
From the partner of my life;
But I regret to say, sir,
I've never had a wife.

This interplay between officer and men, which moves playfully to the punchline, no doubt tickled the soldiers' fancy, but the verbal sparring match revealed some of the constant negotiations of power that went on among the ranks of the Canadian army. This is a manly exchange of wits and guile, the very characteristics of the "old soldier," and no doubt efficient and respected officers. The "old soldier" can have his way — or try to in this case — without destabilizing the system.

There were sharper jabs at the officers in the songs, skits, cartoons, and trench newspapers, but "old soldiering" tended to reflect the inherent tension between leaders and led, between the heroic and the anti-heroic. These anti-heroes were not simply about reflecting the complex relationships in the army; they were embraced by the soldiers as a way of seeing themselves. *The Listening Post* had one amusing exchange between soldiers about the issuing of medals:

Bill: 'Say, hear that Jock Robinson got the D.C.M.'
Fred: 'What for?'
Bill: 'I dunno.'
Fred: 'Blimy, why ain't I got one too, I hid in the same dug-out.'⁴¹

Anti-heroic jokes like this must have been particularly perplexing to civilians who viewed soldiers as nothing less than heroes fighting for the Empire. The embracing of the anti-hero was in opposition to the expectation foisted on soldiers by civilians, and there was an appeal in approving of the unsoldierly in a hierarchical formation that demanded much sacrifice from its members, including, to some degree, their individualism.

41 CWM, *The Listening Post* 16 (17 June 1916), 96.

Ignatz Hump was an anti-hero who the Canadian soldiers followed in *The Listening Post*. “The Adventures of Ignatz Hump” was serialized over several issues and his “long-service” in the paper revealed his popularity, as the readers could easily express their dislike of the trench newspaper content to the editors who shared the trenches with them.⁴² Ignatz Hump was described as:

...not a particularly beautiful person according to peace time standards. He stood fully five feet three in height and as of the build called slight. His features were non-descript and greatly overlaid by freckles. His pompadour required pruning, or, in other words he needed a hair cut. There were soup stains on his lapel, or there would have been had he had either soup or lapels. For the want of the latter, his tunic had suffered. He wore an officer's cast-off cap, a pair of dingy riding breeches, the gift of a fellow warrior of the A.S.C.; puttees with the effect of ballet shirts, and large boots of one time colour which he inherited from a deceased comrade The battalion to which our hero belongs was due for a rest, and from the time the announcement was made Ignatz smacked his lips in anticipation of a period of blissful leisure.⁴³

Far different than a hapless new recruit who does not understand his role in the army, the mismatched, hoboish Hump is actively finding ways to push back against the system. This “old soldier” has not given up soldiering, but fighting the enemy seems far less important than relaxing with alcohol and women in the *estaminets* behind the lines. For good measure, because he has no money to “purchase these golden pleasures,” he steals a Crown and Anchor board in order to fleece his friends, and later our “hero,” as the story ironically characterizes him, bilks his officer of additional money to drink himself into a stupor.⁴⁴ Hump was unheroic in stature or action, but his actions were humorous, and perhaps envied by some Canadians.

There were no badges or medals distinguishing the “old soldiers,” but they were an identifiable group amongst Canadian formations, and loomed out of proportion to their numbers in the soldiers’ cultural products. They included the experienced pre-war soldiers, but also many of the new breed of veterans who had served and survived at the front. While the “old soldier” embraced anti-heroic actions of flaunting authority, dodging duties, and cheating his mates, these actions did not extend in the soldiers’ culture to any refusal to fight in battle. But there was another class of anti-hero who indeed filled that anti-soldiering role.

42 For a discussion of trench newspapers, see Audioun-Rousseau, *Men at War 1914–1918*; Fuller, *Troop Morale*; and Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship during the Great War*, chap. 5.

43 CWM, *The Listening Post* 18 (21 July 1916), 111.

44 CWM, *The Listening Post* 20 (10 December 1916), 131; *Ibid.*, 25 (21 May 1917), 171.

Leadswingers and Malingers

One of the most prevalent anti-heroic themes within the soldiers' culture is the art of malingering. Malingering, or leadswinging in the soldiers' parlance, was the attempt by soldiers to feign illness or injury to escape duty, and in the process be transferred to a safer rear area. Malingering was no joking matter to an army that prized itself on strict discipline in keeping soldiers at the front, and could hold them there on penalty of death, but it was a theme prevalent in the soldiers' dark humour.⁴⁵

The regimental medical officer (MO) was a target for much of the angst and anger in the trench newspapers. It was the MO who could send a man from the firing line to the rear, and they had been instructed by senior officers to be vigilant. As detectives of real and imagined illness, the MO rarely let sick soldiers out of the line and often the remedy for ailments was the pill No. 9, a laxative. One medical officer described that his "chief duties consists of handing out sentences to the bearers and pills with advice to the Battalion. His King and Country also expect him to convince a sick man that he is not sick."⁴⁶ Private Archie Selwood, who went to France with the 72nd Battalion at age 35, remarked on the stringent medical examinations: "Unless there was blood, we got little sympathy."⁴⁷ Soldiers' humour was replete with references to the MO and his pill No. 9, as well as attempts by malingers and leadswingers to escape duty.

Under the title of "The Ancient Order of Lead Swingers," Private C.B. Eversick put out a call in the pages of *The Listening Post* to "all experts at swinging the lead," in order to form a club to beat the medical officers. Playing up the anti-heroic nature of malingering, in addition to his own moniker of Eversick, other club members included Lord Windhupp, Sir Verey Badheart, and the Duke of Wellinrear. "All windy soldiers are welcome." The group's goal was to establish a branch of malingers to assist one another in "outwit[ting] telepathic pill-throwers"; to "concentrate expert ingenuity for the purpose of discovering diseases and ailments hitherto unknown to medical science"; and to discover the place and units where "sympathetic army doctors (just out) and the cushiest Field Ambulances (newly organized) were situated."⁴⁸ This anti-heroic "call to arms" brought malingering from the shadows into the open. It also noted, in a backhand way, the effectiveness of the medical officers, who could be ruthless in stamping it out. But this was just one of the more flagrant

45 For self-inflicted wounds, see Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain, and the Great War* (London: Reaktion; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

46 CWM, *The Listening Post* 1 (10 August 1915), n.p.

47 LAC, Records of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (RG 41), "Flanders Fields," interview transcripts, v. 16, 72nd Battalion, Private Archie Selwood, 1/11-12.

48 CWM, *The Listening Post* 29 (1 December 1917), 17.

examples of confronting unheroic topics head on in the soldiers' culture. An article in *The Splint Record* spoke of soldiers lying "awake nights thinking up schemes" to get to the rear.⁴⁹ "Lead Swinging — The New Career," again from *The Listening Post*, noted that "the ultimate aim of every God-fearing private is to procure the much coveted" wound to escape the front.⁵⁰

The soldiers' culture was not only represented in newspapers and cartoons. Songs were an important form of soldiers' expression and were sung in the trenches, behind the lines at rest, and while marching. The soldiers' songs ranged from the wistful and sentimental to the raunchy and rowdy, with many focusing on the unheroic and the unsoldierly. "I Want to Go Home," later sung by generations of camp kids with their own parodied lyrics, implored:

I want to go home, I want to go home.
I don't want to go in the trenches no more,
Where the whizzbangs and shrapnel they whistle and roar.
Take me over the sea, where the Alleyman can't get me.
Oh my, I don't want to die, I want to go home.
I want to go home, I want to go home.
I don't want to visit la Belle France no more,
For oh the Jack Johnsons they make such a roar.
Take me over the sea, where the snipers they can't get me.
Oh my, I don't want to die, I want to go home.

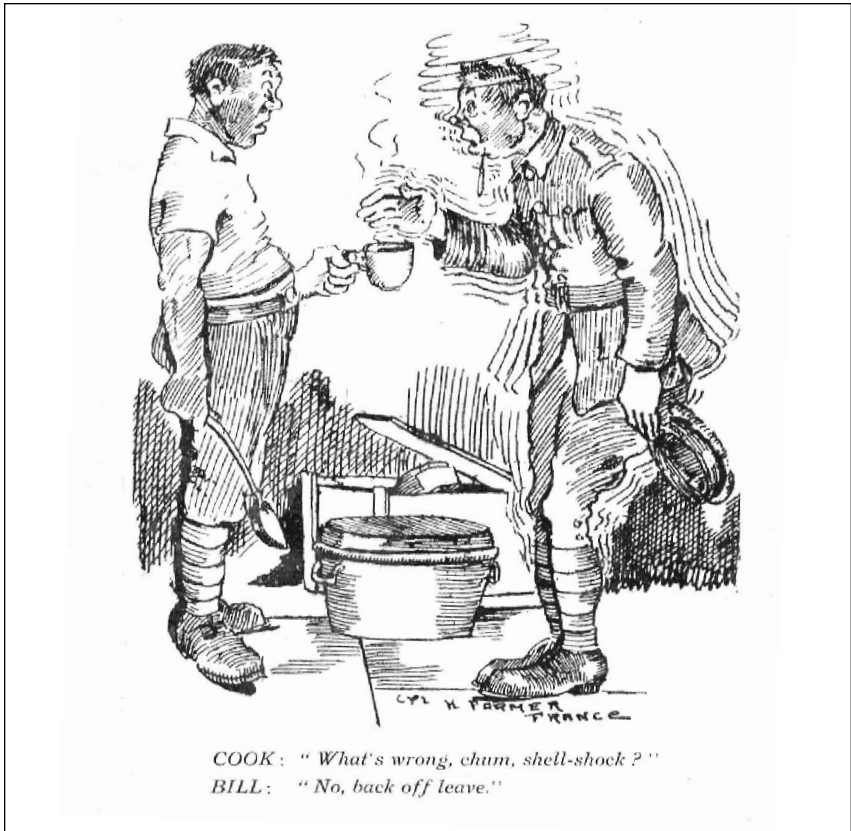
"I don't want to join the Army" is a variation on the anti-heroic theme, with the singers howling parodied lines from the music hall ditty, "On Sunday I walk out with a sailor."

I don't want to join the army,
I don't want to go to war.
I'd rather hang around Piccadilly underground.
Living off the earnings of a lady whore.
I don't want a bayonet in my belly,
I don't want my bollocks shot away.
I'd rather stay in England, in merry, merry England,
And fuck this bleeding life away.

Those who did not know the songs might have thought the British and Canadian Tommy who sang them were on the verge of mutiny. Yet the songs, like the other forms of cultural expression that poked fun at authority or service in the army, were all part of the soldiers' culture that revelled in the blackness of their situation, rather than revealing some sort of mutinous underswell in the

49 Ibid., *The Splint Record* 3 (10 May 1916), 1.

50 Ibid., *The Listening Post* 30 (1 April 1918), 9–10.



*Shellshock cartoon; credit: Canadian War Museum, Military History Research Centre,
The Listening Post 29, 15*

rank and file. In fact, like the regular grouching and complaining so prevalent in the army, the soldiers' anti-heroic songs were a method of relieving pressure, allowing for discontent to slowly dissipate rather than build up for a climactic explosion.

Anti-heroic jokes, stories, cartoons, and songs all offered respectability to the anti-heroic actions of malingering and equally serious search for Blighty wounds. This type of wound — severe enough to be sent back to England (Blighty, in soldiers' slang) — was an honourable way out of the line. Sung to the tune of "Here We Are Again," T.W.L. Macdermot of the 7th Canadian Siege Battery noted the popularity of this jaunty song:

Hit me there! Hit me there!
Hit me there again!

I can't get back with a bit of a scratch like this —
The Allemanne who shot me
The son-of-a-gun that got me
Was far too easy
Heinie! Send another one!

Hit me there! Hit me there!
Hit me there again!
A little scratch ain't good enough for me.
A Blighty now would suit me
Won't somebody kindly shoot me
Hey! Fritz! Hit me there again!⁵¹

“Hit me there again” was but one of many seemingly acceptable references by the soldiers to anti-heroic activities and actions.

It may be surprising to read of soldiers embracing the anti-heroic so readily, looking for ways to deceive their officers or even deliberately seeking a wound to get out of the line. Although soldiers carried out such dark acts, they were, for all intents and purposes, trapped in the cycle of rotating from the firing line to the rear and back again until they were wounded, killed, or driven mad; why would the antiheroic be so acceptable? And why would it be allowed by officers to percolate through the soldiers' culture? The anti-hero, which appeared to epitomize low morale, in so far as soldiers were carrying out traditionally unheroic activities, was ironically good for morale. With soldiers enjoying the antics of the anti-heroes, even projecting on them a form of wish-fulfillment, this was recognized tacitly by officers who not only allowed these cultural references to exist, but also encouraged them to flourish. Moreover, to talk about taboos is to reveal them; to joke about them is to present the truth for all to see. While cheating one's mates, brawling, or malingering from the front were serious military charges, these deviant actions appeared to be condoned in the cultural products, and seemingly accepted by the led and the leaders as good for morale.

Conclusion

In the pages of *The Listening Post*, cartoonist Hugh Farmer codified one of the popular quips among soldiers into a cartoon. A nattily-dressed officer speaks to a Canadian infantryman, appropriately named “Pte. Coldfeet.” The lieutenant asks: “Now Pte. Coldfeet, if you were in the trenches, and the Germans were coming to attack[,] what steps would you take[?]” Coldfeet replies promptly,

51 T.W.L. Macdermot, *The Seventh* (Montréal: Seventh Canadian Siege Battery Association, 1953), 119.



Private Cold feet; credit: Canadian War Museum, Military History Research Centre, The Listening Post 27, 31

“Long quick one’s [sic] sir.”⁵² To those not a part of the soldiers’ culture, anti-heroic actions, gallows humour, and biting satire were sometimes misconstrued as soldiers looking to abandon the war effort. Had the army been reduced to cowards? Had rot set in to the once proud fighting forces? While it might have been true for some soldiers close to succumbing to the stress of combat, most understood their role in the war and were not anxious to leave their mates in the lurch. Anti-heroes helped the soldiers deal with the strain engendered by the boredom, banality, and brutality of trench warfare. These cultural figures were also a reflection of inner anxieties and deep-set wishes, which were not always acted upon, but provided a vicarious outlet for many of the expressions and actions prevalent among most soldiers at the front. One should be wary of unifying themes in cultural history; the messiness and inconsistencies of conflicting issues need to be acknowledged and teased out. Soldiers could despise civilians one day and write pining letters to loved ones at home the next; they could turn their nose down at the “eye wash” emanating from ultra-patriotic papers and then turn to those same newspapers to understand what was happening at the front; they could be dodging shells one minute and then, after clearing the wreckage of a trench or helping a bloodied companion to the rear, return to collect the same shell bits as trophies or souvenirs. Heroes could be

52 LAC, RG 9, vol. 5079, *The Listening Post* (10 August 1917), 31.

anti-heroes in the complicated and constructed world of the trenches, where nothing was as it had been promised in the propaganda, and soldiers needed to create new tools to survive the unending strain.

"Old soldiers," malingers, and other anti-heroic types offered the soldiers new ways to view the war with a grim smile and a phlegmatic shrug, while providing a form of agency for the civilian-soldiers, many of whom felt caught in the twilight world of the trenches and in the clutches of army discipline. Charles Pearce wrote to his father on the one-year anniversary of his service in the army: "I am beginning to feel that I have always been in the army. I feel as though I had lived two lives for I have seen as much in one year here as I had in all my life before."⁵³ Pearce's "two lives" ended on the Western Front, where he joined more than 60,000 Canadian slain. But several hundred thousand more survived. In the postwar years, these soldiers remained the heroes who had fought and sacrificed for their country, King, and Christ.⁵⁴ Most veterans did not contradict this heroic role, but many had sustained themselves during the war by embracing the anti-heroic. Wyndham Lewis spoke of the anti-heroic tradition in the British army, which also seeped into the Canadian soldiers' ethos, as the cultural tools linked the fighting forces: "A V.C. is after all a fellow who does something heroic; almost unEnglish. It is taking things a bit too seriously to get the V.C. The really popular fellow is the humourous 'Old Bill' á la Bairnsfather. And it was really 'Old Bill' who won the war."⁵⁵ The role of the anti-hero in soldiers' cultural products redefined the notion of the hero, or at least added a new layer of interpretation to how civilian-soldiers endured and survived the unimaginable strain and horror at the front. In a war that produced the absurdity of soldiers burying themselves in order to live, where they had traded the comfort of life at home for the deprivations in trenches, where bankers, clerks, and farmers were being subjected to wanton death and destruction, and in turn meting it out, it may not be surprising that the heroic Canadian soldier so readily embraced the anti-heroic.

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53 CWM, Charles Pearce papers, 19810740-054, letter, 21 August 1915.

54 For the postwar construction of memory and the heroicizing of veterans, and especially the fallen soldiers, see Vance, *Death So Noble* and Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

55 P.W. Lewis, *Blasting and Bombardiering* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1937), 37–8.

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